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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 001810

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: WHERE HAVE ALL THE ISLAMISTS GONE?

REF: A. ALGIERS 1749
[1](#)B. ALGIERS 1267

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Many observers here think Islamist parties suffered a significant defeat in the November 29 local elections (ref A). The moderate Islamist MSP, a member of the presidential coalition, received an official total of just 10.69 percent of the vote, while the opposition Islah party received a mere 1.48 percent. The MSP won more votes and more seats at the local level, but it actually finished behind both of its partners in the governing coalition as well as a previous little-known secular opposition party. Many saw its fourth-place showing as a defeat. Party officials from both Islah and MSP attribute the poor showing to two factors. The first, general disillusionment with their role in the political process, led to low Islamist participation in an already low voter turnout. The second, echoed by journalists we spoke to, is a belief among Islamists that a deliberate effort is underway to weaken their presence in Algeria's political space (ref B). Given the dissatisfaction their voters feel, Islamist leaders tell us that continuing to push Islamist parties out of the political process risks fueling a rise in extremism as Islamists search for new forms of political expression. END SUMMARY.

MAIN ISLAMIST PARTY SATISFIED - OFFICIALLY

[1](#)2. (U) Many observers here pointed at the collection of Islamist parties garnering less than 15 percent of the vote as evidence that the Islamists parties are declining in influence. The main Islamist party, the Movement for a Society of Peace (also known as the MSP or its Arabic acronym Hamas) officially claims it did well. Party leader, and Cabinet Minister Without Portfolio Abou Djerrah Soltani, told the Algerian press on December 1 that the party's electoral gains on November 29 were satisfactory. He noted that

-- MSP gained 300,000 more votes than it had won in the 2002 local elections;
-- MSP candidates won 1,100 seats in city councils across Algeria compared to 660 in the 2002 elections;
-- MSP has a majority in 82 city councils across Algeria, compared to majorities in 38 councils after the 2002 elections;

-- MSP won seats in 47 of 48 provincial councils, compared to seats in 18 provincial councils in the 2002 elections.

13. (C) That said, observers here note that MSP, previously the third-most popular party in the country in terms of seats, won fewer seats nationwide than the previously unimportant Algerian National Front (FNA). MSP finished in fourth place, far behind its governing coalition partners, the secular-oriented FLN and RND parties. MSP Vice President (and Soltani rival) Abdelmajid Menasra defended to Poloff on December 2 his party's showing, however, saying that since Islam maintained an extremely significant role in Algerian society, it was simply a question of how this sentiment would express itself in the political arena. Menasra said that the MSP was "content" with the results, and that "fraud was not as bad" as he had expected. In this private conversation, however, he acknowledged that the election results were a setback, and MSP's electoral base didn't turn out as hoped.

HARDER ISLAMIST OPPOSITION FARES BADLY

14. (C) Mohamed Boulahia, the new and controversial leader of the harder line opposition Islamist party Islah, told Poloff on December 3 that his party's poor showing in the elections -- 1.5 percent of votes cast for APCs (city councils), and just one percent of votes cast for APWs (provincial councils) -- resulted from four years of internal party turmoil from which the party was only just emerging. He also charged that Shaykh Abdellah Djaballah, former leader of Islah, had taken all of the party's money, further crippling the organization's ability to get out its message. Thus, he

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said, the Islah of 2007 should be viewed as a new political party. (Note: Islah was able to put forward approximately 400 candidate lists in the election. It ran in all 48 provinces, though not for every city and provincial council.) Boulahia acknowledged that the party still has some distance to go to address its internal leadership and management problems.

ISLAMIST BASE DIDN'T TURN OUT

15. (C) Boulahia referenced the high abstention rate in the November 29 elections and said the official participation rate of 45 percent had been inflated by the government and was more likely closer to 25 percent. He said that many individuals who voted -- most of whom were older people, he said -- did so not because they were interested in the candidates or out of conviction, but to facilitate obtaining government documents such as birth certificates and passports at a later date. (Note: There is a widespread rumor that the government will begin requiring individuals to prove they voted in order to obtain certain basic official documents. End Note.) The average Algerian is simply not interested in politics now and is preoccupied with daily social problems, he observed.

16. (C) Further, Boulahia said, the wounds of the 1992 elections that the Islamic Salvation Front had won and which were "called off without any legal evidence," were still open. These wounds caused Islamists to believe that the system lacks transparency and fairness. Abdallah Djaballah, Boulahia rival for leadership of the Islah Party, claimed to us on December 17 that the poor showing by Islamist parties was due to widespread dissatisfaction with the process among Islamist voters, the vast majority of whom heeded a call from Djaballah and former Islamic Salvation Front leaders like Ali Benhadj to boycott the elections. MSP Vice President Abdelmajid Menasra also told us on December 3 that Islamist supporters largely believed the system was rigged against them and, therefore, they abstained from voting. Even MSP

leader Soltani acknowledged in his December 1 press conference that young people who might have been expected to vote for change through the MSP against the FLN and RND parties didn't vote. Meanwhile, Islah leader Boulahia added that there was a stratum of "Salafist partisans" who rejected elections outright because they viewed them as a contradiction to Islamic law. He predicted that absent positive change in Algeria's socio-economic situation, there would be unrest, a point his party rival Djaballah also emphasized to us on December 17.

ELECTION IRREGULARITIES -- WHO IS TO BLAME ?

17. (C) Boulahia maintained that Islamist losses in the elections were attributable in part also to deliberate government efforts to clamp down on any political figure that has Islamist leanings. In the process leading up to the November 29 local elections, the a source in the Constitutional Council told us on December 18 that a record number of candidates were rejected by the Interior Ministry. Official Interior Ministry figures show that 944 coalition-leading party FLN candidates were rejected, along with 732 from the ruling coalition partner RND party, 587 from the Islamist member of the ruling coalition MSP party, 547 from the Communist Workers' Party, 216 from the secular opposition RCD party, 373 from the secular opposition FFS party and 250 from the Islamist opposition Islah party. (These figures were collated before the parties began the appeals process.) In the 2002 local elections, Mohamed Bedjaoui, then president of the Constitutional Council, took into consideration a total of 187 appeals from political parties about their rejected candidates. In 2007, the numbers skyrocketed, with 329 appeals from the FLN alone, 160 from the RND, 211 from the MSP, 70 from the Workers Party, 58 from the RCD, 81 from the FFS and 38 from Islah. Of these appeals, the Constitutional Council source told us that the FLN had 138 candidates reinstated, the RND 31, MSP 94, the Workers Party 34, FFS 33 and Islah 31. Political parties and the Interior Ministry often release conflicting or vague

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statistics, but all sources agree that the number of rejected candidates reached new heights in 2007. (Comment: At first glance, at least, it is hard to see that Islamist parties such as MSP and Islah suffered any more than non-Islamist parties in terms of the Interior Ministry blocking candidacies. End Comment.)

18. (C) Mohamed Boulahia complained to us about numerous other procedural problems with the elections. These included the absence of an independent election monitoring commission, voting boxes filled with bogus ballots and, in some locations and in contrast to previous standard practice, the lack of certification that voting boxes were actually empty before the official start of voting. On November 29, in one of the voting centers in the eastern city of Batna, he said, the number of votes counted was 1,020, while the number of registered voters was 1,014. Such instances of alleged fraud, Boulahia said, contributed to a lack of transparency for the elections (ref A).

19. (C) In addition to citing specific cases of fraud, Boulahia was quick to identify the Interior Ministry as the main source of election-related trouble. (Comment: Boulahia gained his post as Islah leader as a result of Interior Ministry manipulation against Shaykh Djaballah, so there is more than a little irony in his complaints now about ministry interference. End Comment.) He noted that Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni had stated that any fraud committed during the elections would come at the hand of political parties. Boulahia specifically accused the FLN and National Democratic Rally RND, both members of the governing coalition, of being behind any election-related fraud. For example, Boulahia claimed, as many as 80 percent of individuals charged with

conducting the voting were actually FLN and RND members. The government appointed these individuals, and they served the government's interests. He also asserted that this "structure" had been in place since the opening of Algeria's political space in the early 1990s.

EFFORTS TO CO-OPT AND SUBDUE POLITICAL ISLAM

¶10. (C) Journalists Habib Rachidine (Arabic-language daily El-Bilad) and Nourredine Merdaci (French-language daily L'Expression) echoed Djaballah and Boulahia's view that there is a concerted effort underway to remove Islamist influence from Algeria's political landscape. In December 4 conversations, they told us that the weakening of MSP and marginalization of other smaller Islamist movements is paving the way for the return to the single-party era. According to Rachidine, the FLN and RND are virtually indistinguishable from one another and they certainly are not Islamist.

¶11. (C) Both journalists focused on what they perceived to be the declining influence of the MSP. Merdaci maintained the party was discredited when it decided to join the presidential coalition. In doing so, he said, it had tried to shed its religious mantle, only to lose support from the party faithful. Rachidine maintained that the MSP had been transformed from a strong competitor into a "third wheel" used by the "Pouvoir" (the civil/military inner circle running Algeria).

¶12. (C) Rachidine drew attention to Zerhouni's election-day press conference, in which Zerhouni repeatedly used the Arabic word "tasjid" (to cause to bow down or prostrate, implying in this case, to the government) rather than "tajsid" (to embody, in this case, the will of the people) to describe the outcome of the elections. Rachidine said that Zerhouni, who is known to have difficulty with Arabic, may have misspoken, but he still conveyed a clear message to the political class, namely that the evisceration of the Islamist movements had begun.

COMMENT: EXTREMISTS WIN ?

¶13. (C) It is not surprising that MSP leader Soltani justified his party's showing, but many in the party are unhappy with the results. It also is not surprising the

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fading Islah's party leader Boulahia would blame a variety of people rather than his own campaign which many acknowledge to have been lackluster. What is also clear is that the abstention rate in both the May and November elections was low, especially among the young people who propelled the Islamic Salvation Front to victory in the 1990 and 1991 elections. The question is why those young people don't vote in general, and why they don't vote much for Islamists. There is some government manipulation of voting results, as we have noted previously. The Islamist parties have their own, self-made troubles. MSP suffers a credibility hit due to its membership in the governing coalition. It is not exactly an opposition party in a country where many in the electorate want change. Meanwhile, Islah has plenty of leadership problems. These moderate, legal Islamist parties have also been generally ineffective at displaying an ability to govern in any meaningfully different way, even at the local level.

¶14. (C) Moreover, the brutal, decade-long civil war discredited political Islam for many Algerians and established it as a threat in the eyes of Le Pouvoir. As we reported in ref B, the government has pursued a strategy calculated to divide moderate Islamists while keeping the hardest line Islamists, such as former Islamic Salvation

Front leaders, outside the political process altogether. These factors, combined with a growing public sense that the political process lacks meaning, produced late November's underwhelming performance by the Islamist parties. Nonetheless, Islam is no less relevant in Algeria, despite the difficulties it has faced in manifesting itself politically. Our contacts agree that while Islamists, still a significant presence at the social level, chose not to express themselves in these elections, their dissatisfaction is real, and they may look for other ways to express it. If the warnings of Djaballah and others are to be believed, there is no guarantee that these will resemble the moderate, controlled political Islam preferred by the Algerian government. They warn that dissatisfaction with the legal political system will push many dedicated young Islamists into extremist causes.

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